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ABSTRACT

This research brief summarizes a study of rules and regulations for center-based care and offers discussion and recommendations based on findings. The study analyzed the rules and regulations for center-based care from four states for the Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study (California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina). Investigators developed and applied rubrics to compare policies with recommended practices in the areas of structure, operations, personnel, and context. Researchers did a separate analysis comparing regulations for protecting the child versus regulations for enhancing child development. Across the four states, policies set higher standards for child protection than for enhancement of development. The study concluded that such regulations support the image of child care programs being as a "safe haven" rather than for "developmental enhancement," and that the limited requirements for child care personnel and for community interaction also encourage that image. The brief asserts that these minimum standards departed substantially from professional judgments about what is needed in child care settings, and recommends that the lowest standards be eliminated, more precise language be used by regulators, and developmental enhancement be emphasized. (EV)

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P. Winton

NCEDL Spotlights

No. 19 February 2000

Regulations, quality care rarely match

Following are excerpts from "Child Care Licensing Regulations and Child Care Quality in Four States" in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 14*, No. 3, 313-333 (1999). The authors are James Gallagher, Robin Rooney, & Susan Campbell at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Summary of study

This study analyzed the rules and regulations for center-based care from the four states that had previously been reviewed for the Cost, Quality and Outcomes study.

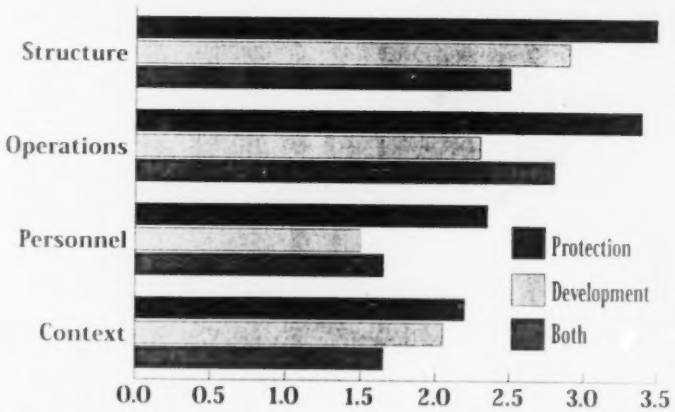
Investigators developed and applied rubrics to compare policies with recommended practices in the areas of structure, operations, personnel and context.

Researchers did a separate analysis comparing regulations for protecting the child versus regulations for enhancing child development.

Across the four states policies set higher standards for child protection than for enhancement of development.

Such regulations support the image of child care programs being a "safe haven" rather than for "development enhancement." The limited requirements for child care personnel and for community interaction also encourage that image.

These minimum standards departed substantially from professional judgements about what is need in child care settings.



The above content analysis summary of state regulations is a composite rating of four states—California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina. For each target area, researchers developed separate rubrics for differential analysis of child protection (health and safety) and the enhancement of child development aspects of the policies.

Policies scored one point if they included little or no reference to the targeted intent, two points if they contained some mention of the intent or some of the criteria listed for quality, three points if they contained some or most of the criteria and were more specific, and four points if all the criteria were included.

Discussion

While we recognize that state standards represent minimum requirements, it is still important to focus on what we consider as "minimum" for child care and child development.

It appears easier, from these findings, to establish standards for child protection than for enhancement of child development. This may be because there is a strong consensus about just what is required for protection of safety and freedom from abuse than about what is needed to enhance development, or it can also mean that, as a society, we are not quite determined to use child care programs to enhance child development through regulations. We can easily agree on safety standards, but we may differ from one another on how to best help the child reach higher stands of cognitive, social, and motor development.

These findings indicate that the minimum standards for these four states do not include many standards for child development that would be considered important by professionals in the field.

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While we should be cautious in assuming a causal relationship between minimal state standards and the number of inadequate or mediocre child care settings that we found in these four states (as well as some outstanding programs), it seems likely that hard pressed directors of child care centers will meet the minimum standards first and then consider what else they should be doing.

If we do wish for a strong role for child care centers to enhance development, then some higher and more specific development enhancement standards need to be written.

Recommendations

Eliminate Lowest Standards

These analyses point out that we still are are a long way from matching child care regulations with what we know as quality. A strong step in the right direction could be made by eliminating some of the lowest standards that are now considered acceptable.

We should recognize that policymakers might dilute standards to avoid the political ramifications of shutting down non-responsive child care centers. However, state licensing agencies might offer incentives for meeting higher standards through increased public subsidies for personnel preparation and by delaying the time that child care providers have in meeting high standards so that they can be reasonably reached. For example: "By the year 2004, we will expect directors to have advanced levels of preparation in child development administration."

More Precise Language

Regulators should describe the practices they are mean to promote. Expectations for health and safety practices were more frequently described in detail, while other quality practices—particularly those related to child development—were referred to vaguely, or not at all.

To link policy with quality practices, such as specific personnel training, access to stimulating materials, and building relationships with families, descriptive language and examples of how that expectation might be implemented are needed. Without language to describe quality practices, such practices may be assumed to be optional.

Encourage developmental enhancement

One important role for professional groups and associations at the state and federal level would be to review periodically the rules and standards for child care to assure that they match current thinking in the field.

One of the eight National Goals in Education endorsed by the 50 governors and the president was that "all children should arrive at school ready to learn." As we enter the 21st century it is clear that we are changing our view of early child care from one of a "safe haven" to one of "developmental enhancement." We need to make sure that our regulations reflect that changed view.

Personnel requirements (higher level of professional preparation) should be made explicit. A message needs to be sent through our regulations that we expect children to have positive experiences that enhance development in child care as well as keeping children healthy and safe.

If you want to know more

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